

BOOK REVIEW by Georgia Douillet

Berkshire | May 2007

The Value of Words

Land of Stone by Karen Chase

What value do words have? In today's email, text-message, call-waiting world, we are seemingly hungry for words—for "information" from one another. Yet those words, so readily sent and forgotten, are cheapened by their very abundance.

In *Land of Stone*, poet and author Karen Chase, who lives in Lenox, Massachusetts, evokes a very different world of words. For 10 years, Chase worked as poet-in-residence at Rosedale, a psychiatric hospital in New York City. The book, published in February, describes her experiences with one patient, a young man named Ben, during the two years they wrote poetry together.

Chase's position at Rosedale was unusual. Though she worked one-on-one with patients, the substance of their exchanges—the poetry—remained private. At Chase's insistence, it was not to be analyzed, included in patients' files or even discussed. Liberated from clinical scrutiny, poetry became a safe vehicle for honest (if oblique) conversations. This liberation seemed particularly important in Chase's work with Ben. At the time of Ben's admittance to Rosedale, he had virtually given up speech. Although during his teenage years Ben was unruly and prone to fits of violence, as he entered his early twenties, he began to speak less and less. Even the words Ben used tended to say very little. He would describe things as being "fine" or "okay," seldom expressing anything about his personal experiences, and never disclosing the root of his silence. Ben was tall, handsome, silent, dis-

tant—as stony as the round rock Chase used as a prompt for their first poem.

Every week for two years, Chase and Ben wrote together. They met in the same room. They went through the same routine. She would hand Ben a typed copy of the poem they had written the previous week. Then they would begin to write, sometimes from a prompt such as a painting or an object, sometimes from a first line she had written at the top of the page. Sometimes Ben would begin, sometimes Chase. When they had finished, she would read the poem aloud, then leave.

I began *Land of Stone* assuming I already knew the trajectory of the book. Poet meets patient. They write together. Gradually, the patient's world opens up. Speech returns. He is cured. It quickly became apparent that the narrative was not that simple. For one thing, *Land of Stone* is as much a story of Chase's journey as it is of Ben's. At the age of 10, Chase experienced the terror of being paralyzed by polio. Although this was a defining experience, she had chosen not to speak of it. She had, in effect, become like Ben, forming a protective wall of silence around something she was unable to examine. The threads of her own healing run through the book. By its close, Chase has formed strong ties to Ben and to Dennis, her supervisor. She has done important life work. For his part, Ben regains the ability to communicate, enough that he is able to rejoin the world outside the safety of Rosedale.

In the end, though, there is



Wayne State University Press • Author Karen Chase

no neat sense of total healing. But perhaps this concept is a false one. The story, like healing itself, is about process. In her account, Chase travels and retravels the journey from her early sessions with Ben to their last ones. From the distance of time, she analyzes the words he wrote with the precision of a college English professor (during her work with Ben, such dissection was not at all the point). It is at times difficult to get a sense of where Chase is headed. The book offers a sometimes verbose, sometimes confused story of inner journey. This may explain, in part, why I find Chase's work ultimately has as much to say about the nature of poetry as about its therapeutic use.

At its best, poetry is the most condensed form of truth possible. Poetry channels the unconscious or sub-literate, making connections which, though sometimes not logical on the surface, have a deeper truth. When Ben and Chase shared a poem, they engaged in a conversation of the uncon-

scious—that is, a conversation between two people allowing themselves to sink deep below the social norms of speech. "The mute heart of the work is metaphor," Chase writes. "Metaphor is what allows poetry to get written."

But are metaphors universal? Or is the magic, the mystery—the universality—of poetry based on the fact that metaphor is individual? As reader and as author, we take from a poem what we bring to it. Ben's favorite metaphors revolved around color and weather. Through their use, Ben both approached and pulled away from the innermost workings of his mind. As facilitator to this process, Chase's role was to pare herself down to a kind of silence in order to make space for Ben to speak, as the 22 poems included at the end of the book make clear. (The lines are labeled to indicate which are hers and which are Ben's.) In Chase's lines, the reader can see that she stays acutely alert to the nuanced direction of his. She stays out of the way. She

reinforces the mood. She keeps the page open so that his lines can take the lead. Ben, for his part, seems utterly authentic. His words are not at all cheap. Each one is considered. At one point, Chase reports, Ben tells his therapist, "In poetry, we've written about everything. We've extinguished the topics." Without ever writing a confessional—without ever dropping what Chase calls "the veil of metaphor" that he holds around himself—Ben has found a medium for expressing his emotional interior. Because of this, the poems included at the end of the book are as honest, as universal, as any I have read.

While Chase's work in the field of psychology is intriguing, *Land of Stone* reveals as much, if not more, about the value of words. What is poetry? What is a poet? And what role do words have in our ability to communicate not only to others, but to ourselves? "In the culture of our new millennium, silence has no place at all," Chase observes. And yet, poetry begins in silence, and it is the space between silence and words that a poet—any poet—bridges. During their final meeting, Ben tells Chase, "The word duet is a good word." This, more than anything, holds out hope for his healing—to Chase, who eventually loses touch with him, and to the reader. Ben can accept dialogue. He can begin again to take his part in life's conversation.

Georgia Douillet is a writer and gardener, and a new member of TWT's editorial team.